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ABSTRACT

Problems facing literacy education include how to attract nonEnglish speaking and illiterate adults to the programs and how to reduce attrition and increase motivation for the students who do come to the programs. One method that could help to solve these problems is "community literacy," an approach to learning in which the curriculum is derived from the needs of students and in which students and teachers are actively engaged in the process of learning and community development. Community literacy could help overcome the learning barriers many literacy/English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students face, such as poor self-image or lack of relevancy of the curriculum to their lives. At present, many literacy programs unwittingly reinforce learning conflicts; for example, some ESL literacy tests have hidden cultural and social assumptions that stereotype the learners. Instead, such materials could be changed to correspond to the actual situations and life issues that students confront. With this new student-developed material, the teacher would use a five-step inductive questioning strategy, moving from asking students specific informational questions to exploring the nature of the problem presented in the text and considering possible actions to change the situation. Because literacy is only one of the many problems adults face, other supportive services should be provided; community sites for satellite centers should be developed; in addition, literacy instruction should be incorporated into existing community programs. (KC)

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LITERACY AND MINORITY LANGUAGE GROUPS

Community Literacy as Method and Goal

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Today I would like to begin with a passage from Freedom Road, Howard Fast's novel of Reconstruction and universal suffrage in the South after the Civil War. The hero is Gideon, an illiterate former slave, whose neighbors send him as their representative to South Carolina's first constitutional convention. Gideon is talking here to his friend and minister about his fears of serving as a delegate while being unable to read and write.

"How come you got no reading, no writing?" Brother Peter asks. "Well, never was a school for niggers--never was a school for poor whites either. There's a start. Make a law for schooling, a good law...First time they give you delegate pay, you take that dollar buy a book. Get yourself a learning book first, spelling book. Then maybe a book of sums. Come that time, you know yourself what kind of book you want next."

Then Brother Peter cautions, "Ain't all to be found in books. Ain't no books wrote unless there's something (already) happened." He tells Gideon to trust in his own judgement and to seek with others the knowledge to propose programs for the new South. With this advice, Gideon goes to the convention, learns to read and write, and becomes an outstanding legislator.

* *

What did Literacy mean to Gideon and to those who inherited a similar legacy? Literacy meant the ability to read and write.

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But it also stood for confidence and for the capacity to represent his neighbors. Yet was it literacy alone that allowed Gideon to develop this confidence--or was it the change in society that demanded and gave him the opportunity to take on a new role and propelled him in that role to seek literacy. This is the central thought I wish to raise and discuss today.

Beyond a narrow definition of literacy as individual skill acquisition, is what I call community literacy. Community literacy assumes that education never occurs in a vacuum. It is inseparable from students' lives outside the classroom. Community literacy involves individuals in a group process as learner and teacher in their own development, and involves the community as a place for learning and a place to return to, for teaching.

In the following discussion, I will present the problems and challenges that face ESL and literacy students, and within that context offer a critique of the prevailing definition of literacy. What are our students' literacy needs, their social environment? How do current literacy programs meet or avoid that environment and those needs? I will close with what I hope is a new vision of community literacy, based on my study of how instruction translates into learning in the classroom and the community. (This paper will focus on an overall approach rather than specific learning techniques.)

The prevailing definition of literacy provides us with a measure of a minimal level of reading, writing, and computational skills presumed to be necessary for functioning in

society. But what does "functioning" really mean? Being able to write a check? Read a bus schedule? Follow written directions at work? These may be valid criteria for determining ability to read and write, but they do not recognize that the majority of our students (or potential students) function quite well enough to survive; in fact they may have much to teach us about survival. They have learned to rely on and to use family and friends to interpret. Their problems differ from ours: many students do not even have the means to open a bank account.

The functional definition of literacy also fails to take into account students' self-images, their low self-esteem in class acquired from years of living in adverse social conditions and conversely, their pride in the skills they have outside of school.

The functional approach assumes literacy is an individual skill acquired through step-by-step sequences. Yet, literacy involves the active learning of critical thinking and problem-posing skills. Teaching critical thinking requires an interaction between the individual and the group, and a knowledge of the learner's socila context.

Most importantly, programs based on functional literacy have not yet successfully answered fundamental questions: how to attract even a fraction of the non-English speaking and illiterate adults to our programs; how to reduce attrition; and how to increase motivation for the students we do reach. The success of our students depends on their overcoming exactly the problems

faced by Gideon: a lack of self-esteem, and crippling doubts of their effectiveness to change and to bring about change.

The broader definition what I call community literacy incorporates the context of students' lives, and a group process for evaluating this context. Curriculum is based on students' needs, problems, and their current strengths to meet these needs. Everyone in the community--not just the teacher--is assumed to be both instructor and learner. Through dialogue and the sharing, in spoken English and written form, of life experiences, students develop the self-confidence to actively pursue their education. Students become peer teachers, and, they have the social support in the group to think critically about themselves in their community, and to discover new ways to address the problems.

This idea of community literacy is not new. In the southwest, where I come from, Native Americans have passed on traditions for centuries with everyone a teacher, regardless of formal credentials. (Pioneers in community literacy include Myles Horton, Jack London, Jack Mezirow, Paulo Freire, John Ohlinger, Ira Shor, (see resources)). My own introduction to community literacy came ten years ago in California through a state adult education grant to "reach the unreachables." Nevertheless, as I describe in my book, Language and Culture in Conflict: Problem-Posing in the ESL Classroom, we succeeded through "community literacy" in reaching new adult students.

WHO ARE THE STUDENTS

The more we know about our students, the more important a community literacy approach appears. Here are some examples of

students in my clasrooms, and the influence their lives have on their learning.

As you know, in ESL teaching, we typically ask about our students' families. We may ask, "how many children do you have?" A Southeast Asian refugee student may answer, "I have four," yet this answer tells little. Is she talking about her children in the U.S., about all who were born (including those who died in an escape), or about the ones still left in Vietnam? A simple question may elicit a simple answer, but emotional turmoil may lie beneath. Take the typical question, "where do you live?" If the student is an illegal refugee from Central America, he may experience a panic of being discovered. A recent immigrant may be struck with homesickness.

Finally, let's look at a common situation: a student who returns to class after being sick for two weeks. During this period her learning has continued outside of class. How sympathetic or devastating were her encounters with clinic personnel, with welfare, with medicaid? How do these encounters affect her view of the teacher--or her willingness to learn. These examples indicate that English and literacy lessons can have a high emotional charge whether or not the teacher realizes it. I call these emotions--the ones students bring with them from their experiences--their hidden voices.*

These hidden voices are essential for the educator to uncover because they have the power to block learning. The blocks can be emotional (a sadness from the past, or shame at not speaking English or knowing how to read). They can be structural

(a lack of contact between foreign and English speakers). They can be social or economic, such as prejudice and job instability. Or they can be cultural, with students (both U.S. and foreign-born) fearing the loss of their cultures as they learn the expectations of the dominant society.

Yet, and this is my argument, the emotional power behind these hidden voices, if tapped in the classroom, can drive and inspire learning. By integrating students' concerns into the curriculum, community literacy helps students articulate the hidden conflicts and move beyond the blocks.

The first step to this approach is to learn about (and from) our students. This requires research and active listening in students' communities, but the time is well spent.

* *

ESL and literacy students come from the ranks of the poor and minority communities. (This is even more true for those unserved by current programs). On the average, they have little formal education or a history of frustration in U.S. schools. (I exclude ESL foreign students in University programs who are educated and often wealthy). Sixty million people living in the U.S. have been described as lacking basic competencies; a similar number has been documented of high school dropouts.[1] Current annual figures tell us 80% of these dropouts are Black or Hispanic.[2]

Students also come from the three to four million immigrants of the last decade, three-fourths from Latin America and Asia, and many illiterate or semi-literate in their own languages.[3]

They come from the estimated 30 million U.S. residents of non-English language backgrounds. Contrary to what we might expect, two-thirds of these people who might come to ESL classes were born in the U.S., including Puerto Rico and U.S. territories.[4] These figures, compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics in 1977, don't include the five to ten million undocumented residents, primarily from Mexico and Central America.[5]

Of the total number of adults without a high school diploma, 75% earn less than $5000 annually.[6] Close to 90% of the Hispanic population, for example, work in low-paying, unskilled and semi-skilled jobs.[7]

Illiteracy is clearly not separate from linguistic, cultural, racial, or socio-economic barriers. It is also clear that millions perhaps tens of millions of people are not reached by the current enrollment of a few million adults.[8]

What does the classroom currently hold for these students? We expect that enrolling in a basic literacy or ESL program could be the new beginning in students' lives: finding a better job or having access to services. And this happens, for many. Yet for others, in fact most, the classroom symbolizes the gateway to the dominant society, and their response is far-reaching and complex. Students may simultaneously desire this access, but fear assimilation in their will to preserve their cultural integrity. Many, as documented in the statistics, find access extremely difficult to achieve. Inevitably, the classroom becomes a focus of their

cultural and social conflicts. These conflicts may increase students' frustration, inhibit learning, or pressure them to drop out.

Unfortunately, many of the teaching materials in use today don't recognize these issues. Although many competency-based curricula are excellent for teaching living skills, some are superficial to the point of unwittingly reinforcing learning conflicts.

Let's evaluate one from the field of ESL. This dialogue takes place at a doctor's office; a similar unit might well appear in a competency on health.

AT THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE

Mrs. Garcia:	Is Doctor Smith in?
Nurse:	What is your name? Do you have an appointment?
Mrs. Garcia:	No, but I'm very sick. My name is Mrs. Garcia. My friend told me to see Dr. Smith.
Nurse:	Let me speak to the doctor. (returning to the desk) Dr. Smith will see you after the next patient.
Dr. Smith:	What is your trouble, Mrs. Garcia?
Mrs. Garcia:	I have a bad pain in my chest. I cough all the time.
Dr. Smith:	Your lungs seem clear. I'll give you a prescription. Have it filled at the drug store. You need to keep quiet and get some rest.

What are the cultural and social assumptions in this lesson and what effect may they have on students? First, the lesson assumes a situation familiar to students, that they have their own doctor and can be squeezed into a busy schedule without an appointment. Yet, our students more often go to clinics, wait in lines, and rarely can take rests from their jobs. Many do not have paid sick days.

Equally important, the dialogue doesn't explore the feelings nonliterate and non-English speaking patients may have when seeing a doctor. They may be hesitant about signing papers, feel embarrassed when talking to the doctor, or believe they are not getting proper care. Although this lesson presents a target vocabulary, it misreads our students life situations and in so doing blocks learning or at least fails to facilitate it.

New developments in ESL practice and research offer some answers to these concerns. Current language acquisition theories emphasize the need to teach through meaningful communication and the affective domain. Students are encouraged to experiment and formulate their own thoughts into new sentences. As James Alatis, executive-director of TESOL, said in a recent speech, "The ESL teacher is not simply a technician. The most important quality for teachers to have is the cultural sensitivity and the ability to start from learners' needs."

Changes in ESL practice, however, may not be enough. The students' world outside the classroom must be invited in. In this section of my discussion, I will explore how an integrated community literacy approach can help solve the problems in

literacy education I mentioned earlier: incorporating new groups of students, holding students currently enrolled, and creating successful learning experiences to build self-confidence both in and out of the classroom.

COMMUNITY LITERACY

Community literacy is an educational process which takes curriculum from community and student needs, and, through dialogue and co-education, suggests changes back to the community.

What I call community literacy is practiced throughout the world in community development, health and literacy programs. These programs take much of their inspiration from the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who developed a highly successful national literacy program for slumdwellers and peasants in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Using socially and emotionally-laden words and pictures, Freire generated student discussions on how to improve their lives. Though his phonetic literacy method does not directly apply to teaching ESL (and possibly English), the basic premises hold true. Education should challenge students to think critically about their lives. The skills they learn should help them seek the changes they want in their own lives and communities. These can range from food coops, a community newspaper, a tenants' group. In the last decade, ESL and literacy programs in the U.S. and Canada, and more recently in the Southeast Asian refugee camps, have been developing these ideas into integrated community-based curricula.

To translate community literacy into actual clasroom practice, I suggest a three-step process: listening (or learning our students' concerns); dialogue (or codifying these concerns into lessons for language and literacy learning); and action (or discussing and reading and writing about the changes students would like).

To listen in a local community, teachers can use systematic investigative techniques, similar to anthropological fieldwork. As a class exercise, students and teachers can map neighborhoods, by taking pictures and interviewing residents. Teachers can participate in community cultural events, visit students, and follow their encounters at clinics, welfare offices, and schools.

To stimulate dialogue on the identified local issues, teachers codify student concerns into class materials, custom-made for that group, preparing what I call "codes." A code is a physical representation of an issue in any format; a picture, story, role-play, or song. Because it is concrete and one step removed from actual experience, students can project their emotional and social responses into the code, making for lively discussion and writing assignments. A good code will present a daily problem easily recognized by students, contain many sides of the problem, and be open-ended, leaving the students to reflect on possible actions for change. Codes are more than visual aides. They are a key to the educational process, for they inspire critical thinking about issues in students' and teachers' lives.

To see how one of these codes work, let's revisit a doctor's office, in this case a health clinic, for a classroom dialogue:

1. Calling the Clinic

Receptionist: County Clinic. May I help you?
Felicia: My son is very sick. His head hurts. It's hot.
Receptionist: What? Oh you mean he has a fever. What's his name?
Felicia: His name is Pablo Ramirez, R-A-M-I-R-E-Z.
Receptionist: Has he been here before?
Felicia: Excuse me, can you repeat that please?
Receptionist: That's OK. I'll check his record.

Receptionist: We don't have a record for Pablo Ramirez. He needs to come in to the clinic.
Felicia: Can you speak slower, please?
Receptionist: He needs to come in.
Felicia: Can he see the doctor?
Receptionist: Yes, bring him after one o'clock. The clinic opens at one.
Felicia: When?
Receptionist: (loudly) After one o'clock tomorrow.
Felicia: Oh, one o'clock. Does anyone speak Spanish there?
Receptionist: No, I'm sorry.

From: Language and Culture in Conflict: Problem-posing in the ESL Classroom, p. 144.

For the literacy student, this dialogue could be revised to have the mother ask if she'll have to wait a long time because her shift starts at 3:00 p.m. The receptionist might say that she's sorry, but the mother will just have to come and wait.

How do we use this code to generate dialogue, the second stage of a community literacy approach? The teacher adopts the role of a questioner, asking critical questions and bringing up potential conflicts. I have developed a five-step inductive questioning strategy to help teachers with their own questioning skills. First, teachers can ask specific questions about the picture and dialogue. (What is happening here? How may people are there? What are they doing?) The second step defines the problem. (Are there lines? Does anyone speak Spanish at the clinic? Is that a problem?) The third step is very important because students share their experiences in comparison with the one represented. (How does the picture make you feel? Is this similar to your situation? Different? Has this happened to you before? To a friend?) The fourth step is to ask why there is a problem. (Why are there lines? Why are there no people who speak Spanish? Why is health care often difficult to obtain?) Step five is the final action stage. (What can you do about this situation? Should clinic staff speak Spanish? What can people in the neighborhood expect? What can they do?)

This final questioning stage takes students into positive action, though solutions may take years (even a lifetime). This process is therefore called "problem-posing" (not "problem-solving") recognizing the complexity of solutions for individuals

and communities. Taping and transcribing the discussion can lead to reading skill development and further writing assignments.

After each lesson, teachers must evaluate whether this issue was important and should be pursued, or whether another issue surfaced of interest to the students. The curriculum is in constant evolution as teachers fashion lessons by listening to their students' response.

In this way, literacy lessons gain motivational force, diminish attrition caused by emotional or social conflicts between schooling and the community, and give value to students' lives.

MOVING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Recognizing the difficulties in integrating school and everyday life for adult learners is only the first step. Community literacy requires structural and policy changes that parallel curriculum changes. Policy considerations determine how we reach potential students whose skill level is minimal, whose income is below the poverty line, and who have little expectations of future education. Relative to students' life and job needs, illiteracy is only a small problem. These potential students may not necessarily see the need for a literacy class even if one was advertised in their neighborhood laundromat or on the local bus.

A genuine community literacy program would attempt to meet student needs on all levels, with classroom instruction as one component. We need creative thinking on student recruitment and on developing community sites for classrooms.

Probably the best way to recruit students in my experience is to provide support services. Day care and transportation are obvious needs; assistance with government agencies or counselling can be equally important. A paid outreach coordinator/social worker will add immeasurably to a project's success.

A second important aspect is finding community sites for satellite centers, rather than increasing enrollment at established institutions. Satellite centers have been encouraged in recent years in worksites, community centers, and churches. Yet even if they offer social services and have backing from local leaders, class sites in the community may not be enough.

In order to confront this enormous task we face, we have to break out of the institutional mode and conventional ways of thinking. I suggest we look at literacy from a different angle, that of the student. If literacy is <u>not</u> the primary perceived need of the many adults who seek employment or better benefits, then to bring them literacy, we have to first provide avenues for potential students to negotiate immediate needs and then have them raise the question of literacy. If community-based groups already are involving individuals with similar needs, why not place a teacher with a group on a trial basis to develop a literacy component to their program? Let's explore a few specifics.

In many communities, there is already a church service group that meets regularly. The minister may welcome a literacy teacher to supplement the program, and people will attend in order to better serve their church. There may be a food bank or

cooperative sponsored by a voluntary non-profit group. Individuals may be involved because of reduced food costs, but they may be eager to meet for literacy.

Mutual aid societies, community organizing groups, neighborhood associations, even teenage car clubs meet for diverse reasons but all work with people who can benefit from ESL or literacy classes. Classes can take place in housing projects, migrant camps, or even in homes, anywhere people get together. Classes do not necessarily need a permanent site. They need students and motivation to learn, which can emanate from the need for literacy, or from the need for community improvement. Teachers and materials can be provided by the sponsoring educational institution or created by the group themselves as codes of their community concerns.

In addition to the recommendation for community sites, I want to re-emphasize here a previous point of the process of community literacy. The curriculum must also change to reflect the needs and context of students' lives. For example, if students are having difficulties finding adequate housing, use codes on overcrowding, landlord responsibilities in repairs, and renters' legal rights. Have students propose actions they may take: talking with a tenants' rights group, or finding their public voice by writing an article for the local newspaper. Students truly can become teachers in their communities in the same way they have become teachers in the classroom. (This curriculum would probably be the first issue for a literacy class started with a tenants' group).

The recommendation--to de-emphasize educational institutions by incorporating literacy into existing community programs--is not new, though it has never been implemented nationally. To put such a program in motion, administrators may have to re-evaluate their criteria for success. Instead of class size, we may consider continuity of study or students' use of their learning in the community. Questions remain on how to provide needed support for the community classes in administrative, teacher training, and social services.

To start implementing the approach, each community needs an inventory of the potential students, and existing community programs. Educational institutions in each community could use the anthropological approach (suggested earlier) to inventory community resources and their leaders. Involvement and ideas should be solicited from the potential students themselves. Once surveys have been compiled, teachers need training in the community literacy approach--i.e., how to carve a curriculum from the concern. of the community, how to create problem-based codes from the concerns, and how to develop questioning strategies that lead to critical thinking.

Many community-based programs now operating throughout the U.S. and Canada could provide training leadership. In cooperation with state or local institutions, they could sponsor regional conferences for training teachers. These groups include Solidaridad Humana on New York's Lower East Side (which began in 1971), Bronx Educational Services (since 1973), Instituto del Progreso Latino in Chicago (since 1975), the Mexican American Cultural Center in

Texas (since 1971), Partners in Learning in Miami (since 1979), the Raza Center for Alternative Education in Los Angeles (since 1980), and the ESL Core Group in Toronto (since 1977). Other networks exist in Canada through the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture, and in the U.S. through newsletters such as "Basic Choices," "Alternativas," and the "CBFSEI Newsletter." The Queens College Linguistics Department has one of the teacher training programs in community literacy.

As training stimulates new programs, research should document what new students are reached and how the classes affect their self-images and community awareness.

* *

Throughout this paper, I have emphasized the few basic concepts of community literacy. Illiteracy is not isolated from students' other life problems; these problems show up in class, if adults come at all, as low self-esteem, or as hidden voices that block learning. These same life demands and lack of classroom support services prevent the many other adults from coming to literacy/ESL classes.

A community literacy approach helps students move beyond their individual barriers to learning and involves them actively in a group process to change their lives as learners and as emerging teachers in their communities. Community literacy does more than provide students with the instruction needed for speaking English and writing; in learning words, they learn their worlds.

Thank you very much.

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ORGANIZATIONS AND JOURNALS

"Alternativas" (network for over 30 community-based programs in U.S.)
Post Office Box 424
Senorial Mall Station
Rio Peidras, Puerto Rico 00926

"Basic Choices"
1121 University Avenue
Madison, Wisconsin 53715

"Convergence" (international adult education journal)
International Council Adult Education
29 Prince Arthur Avenue
Toronto, Canada M5R 1B2

"Literacy/Alphabetisation" (literacy programs throughout Canada)
c/o Sidney Pratt
Ministry of Citizenship and Culture--Newcomer Services
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